

Can You Influence Laws to Benefit Your Organization?

The answer is a resounding yes if you take a page from the advocacy of one Denver hospital. Here's how a grassroots network fuels the hospital's influence with the state legislature.

By Amy Showalter

Booster seats are required for kids in Colorado who have outgrown their child safety seats. Newly licensed teenage drivers may not drive with friends in their cars until they've had their license for six months. And Colorado health officials are spending more money than ever to make sure kids get immunized.

Those are some examples of how the Children's Hospital in Denver, a top-ranked pediatric health-care network and research hospital, uses grassroots advocacy to get things done in its state capitol.

Key Ingredient

Viewed by its peers as one of the most effective grassroots advocacy organizations in the country, the Children's Hospital is a textbook example of how nonprofit organizations establish themselves as legislative powerhouses. A key ingredient in the hospital's success is its 4,000-member Children's Hospital Grassroots Advocacy Network, a six-year-old coalition of health professionals, community leaders, educators, parents, and hospital employees whose members have relationships with legislators across Colorado.

In only six years the hospital created a sophisticated web of volunteer advocates who can mobilize on the turn of a dime. That's something you typically see only among powerful groups like the AARP and National Association of Realtors.

Other Steps

Increasingly, many nonprofit organizations rely on such volunteer networks because — unlike private organizations — nonprofits can't use political action committees to influence the political process.

In Denver, the hospital's network is most intensive during legislative sessions but stays busy all year. Network members speak to community groups, volunteer at advocacy events, write letters to the editor, give interviews to the media, and take other steps to raise awareness about issues affecting children.

Since 2004, the hospital has used Web-based grassroots advocacy software that enables volunteers to send personalized letters to lawmakers with a few computer clicks. The software also makes it easy to measure the impact of the call to action.

The Bottom Line

The network wouldn't exist without the support of the hospital's leaders, who recognize the value of a strong advocacy program. Three full-time staffers keep the network organized and motivated with newsletters,

creative events, and other tools.

Staff members decide which issues to target, says Debbie Federspiel, the hospital's public-affairs manager. "We monitor about 50 issues each session, but we activate the network for only five to 10 issues with the potential to have a broader impact on the health and safety of kids."

There's no doubt that the hospital's position as a leader among children's advocates helps the bottom line. "As a nonprofit organization, we rely on community support," Federspiel says. "Our community needs to know we are looking out for their kids and their families."

Remarkable Results

The hospital hit its stride in 2004 with the passage of a law requiring children who were too big for their car seats to use booster seats. And early in 2005, the state legislature passed a law limiting the number of teens in a car with a new driver for the first six months.

But the hospital's coup de grace was pushing state officials to address Colorado's terrible record for vaccinating its children. The hospital helped publicize the state's ranking as the country's worst in overall childhood

vaccination rates, according to the National Immunization Survey. The network made the ranking real by showing that Colorado's kids came down with whooping cough far more often than kids anywhere else in the country. They also drove home a compelling statistic: More than 60% of children in Colorado with preventable diseases were two years old or younger.

The state legislature responded with a double whammy. First, it increased funding for child immunization by \$1 million by expanding the capacity of community clinics and authorizing a childhood immunization public awareness campaign. Then it spent another \$1.25 million, this time for more outreach and to beef up a centralized registry that wasn't getting much participation from healthcare providers. Participation is growing, and officials are shooting for a 95% participation rate among healthcare providers.

Nonprofits across the country have a lot to learn from the folks in Denver. ■

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